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ABSTRACT

This document reports that many community colleges are considering changes in their traditional semester calendars. In California, the most common question facing colleges is whether to switch from the traditional (in California) 18-week semester to a 16-week one. This paper details the results of a student and faculty survey conducted at Porterville College, a small community college in central California on the compressed calendar and related issues. The student survey was divided into four sections: obstacles to class attendance, days and times classes are scheduled, summer and winter classes, and class and semester preferences. More than 70% of students surveyed indicated they would be more likely to take summer school classes if more were offered and 62% of students expressed a preference for a 16-week schedule. In addition, 82 full-time and adjunct faculty members completed a survey that gauged their willingness to teach summer classes, Friday block classes, and winter intercession courses. Close to half of the faculty surveyed were willing to teach in the early summer, winter intercession, or on Fridays. Less than 30% expressed a willingness to teach the second summer session in late July. Appended are the two survey instruments. (Contains 12 charts and 2 references.) (RC)

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COMMUNITY COLLEGE COMPRESSED CALENDARS: RESULTS OF A STUDENT SURVEY AND A FACULTY SURVEY[1]

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Abstract

Many community colleges are considering changes in their traditional semester calendars. In California, the most common question facing colleges is whether to switch from the traditional (in California) 18-week semester to a 16-week one. Unfortunately, little information is available regarding how a calendar change affects students. This paper details the results of a student and faculty survey conducted at a small community college in central California on the compressed calendar and related issues. Survey results are discussed and the two survey instruments are included as appendices. Future research in this area is discussed as well.

Introduction

Many community colleges are considering amendments to their traditional semester calendars. This is particularly true in California, where unique funding rules for colleges provide an incentive to change.[3] The most common change is for colleges to switch from an 18-week semester to a 16-week one, increasing the number of minutes students spend in class each week so that the same amount of time (or more) is spent on instruction in fewer weeks. Various names are used for revised calendars such as "alternative" schedules or "compressed calendars". There are also many options being considered in various community colleges, such as offering half-semester length courses. Through the remainder of this paper, I will use "compressed calendar" to refer to the conversion from 18 to 16-week semesters.

There are many issues that must be considered when making such a change. Among these are:

- Semester start and end dates
- Class start and end times

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[1] Presented at the Research and Planning Group (RP Group) of the California Community Colleges 40th annual conference, May 1-3, 2002. The author would like to thank Ron Glahn and the entire Porterville College Compressed Calendar Committee for their contributions to this paper.

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[3] A detailed analysis of the funding issue is beyond the scope of this paper. In brief, many colleges have learned that by shortening the length of the semester from 18 weeks to 16 weeks and lengthening the amount of class time per week, the state funding formula will provide them with additional Full-Time Equivalent Students (FTES) without increasing the number of students taught or adding courses. Funding in the state is based on FTES, so this increase means additional funding for the college.

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- Faculty contract issues
- Staff contract issues
- Effect on auxiliary services such as Admissions and Records, Financial Aid, and Maintenance and Operations staff
- Facilities usage
- Effect on summer and winter class offerings

Strangely however, there is little information available on how the calendar change affects students or student outcomes. Some colleges have researched the difference between full length and half-semester classes and found increases in student retention.(Logan and Geltner, 2000) However, very little empirical research exists showing whether a change to a compressed calendar benefits students.

The Porterville College Decision

Porterville College is a small community college located in the San Joaquin Valley of California. The area serves a rural, agricultural population in an economically depressed region. Between 4,000 and 5,000 students attend the college each semester, taught by 87 full-time and more than 100 part-time faculty. Porterville College is part of Kern Community College district, which also includes Bakersfield College and Cerro Coso Community College.

The decision to change to a compressed calendar schedule was discussed during the 2001-02 academic year. The final decision rests with the college Academic Senate. However, the Senate chose to create a participatory governance committee including faculty, administration, staff and students to research the issue and make a recommendation. This committee investigated each of the issues listed above and others before coming to a decision to recommend a calendar change in Spring 2002.

Despite an extensive search, the Porterville College Compressed Calendar committee was able to locate only minimal information regarding the effect of compressed calendars on students. Additionally, the committee attempted to obtain student input via campus meetings, but was unable to garner much interest from students due to scheduling difficulties and the complexity and esoteric nature of the decision being considered. Thus it was decided that a student survey was needed to gather input. The Porterville College Office of Institutional Research worked with the Compressed Calendar Committee to create and administer the survey.

The Student Survey

After much discussion and several drafts, it became clear that the issues involved in the calendar decision were complex and often conflicting. As it was difficult for faculty and staff to fully comprehend these concerns, it was clear that students would find it at least as difficult. Thus the committee eventually determined that the student survey could be better used to gather surrounding information about the various student-related factors that were expected to affect the calendar decision. Among these issues are:

- Scheduling conflicts

- Semester start and end dates
- Class start and end times
- Summer sessions and winter intercession
- Local high school schedules
- Family and work responsibilities
- 3-day per week versus 2-day per week classes

Student Survey Methods

A 28-question survey instrument was designed for use in the spring of 2002. The text of the student survey is reprinted as Appendix A. The Alternative Calendar Committee chose to survey classes meeting on Tuesdays at 10 AM, 2 PM and 7PM in order to obtain information from students who attend classes at a variety of times. We conducted the survey during the second week of the semester to pick up students who might normally drop out of classes due to scheduling conflicts. The survey instrument was pilot-tested in one class during the fall 2001 semester. A total of 14 classes were surveyed on January 22nd, 2002, including 374 students.[4]

The issues involved in changing the college calendar are complex and it would be impossible for students to fully understand the implications of the decision in a brief quantitative survey. Therefore, rather than simply asking students about their calendar preference, the committee chose to use the survey to gather information from students on the various aspects of the decision that would affect them. Thus, the survey could not provide a definitive answer regarding the students' needs and desires regarding a calendar change. Instead, it gives us supporting information on several aspects of students' lives that affect the calendar decision. Much of this information may be useful in the future in other college decision-making.

The survey instrument was divided into 4 substantive sections: obstacles to class attendance, days and times classes are scheduled, summer and winter classes, and class and semester preferences. Additionally, three demographic questions were asked, simply to ensure that the survey respondents accurately reflected the makeup of the student population.

Student Survey Results

The results of the student survey are presented in graphic form on the following pages and are summarized below.

Students were asked about five possible factors which might prove to be obstacles to attending class. These included family responsibilities, work schedule, child care, course schedule, and transportation. The most common obstacles students face are work schedules and course schedules, both of which were problems for more than half of the students surveyed. Family responsibilities also was an obstacle for almost half of the students. Child care and transportation are problems for just over one in five students surveyed.

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[4] These totals include the pilot test, conducted late in the Fall 2001 semester. Because no problems were found with the survey instrument, data from students who participated in the pilot test were also included in the results discussed here.

Chart 1 about here

About half of the survey questions dealt with the days and times when classes are offered. In particular, the committee was interested in learning the extent to which students are willing to take classes in early mornings, afternoons, evenings, and in block schedules on Fridays and Saturdays. Students were asked how likely they would be to attend a class offered at various times. Willingness to attend classes varied greatly depending on the day and time offered, but the most significant finding is that almost any time suggested finds a substantial number of students willing to attend classes. The least popular class time was 6:00 AM, yet even for this time, 18.2% of students indicated that they were "very likely" or "likely" to take a class offered at that time. Projected over the entire student population, at least 800 students would be willing to take 6:00 AM classes.

Charts 2-5 about here

Students were asked if they would be more likely to take summer classes if more were offered and about their likelihood of taking classes during a winter intercession, which could possibly be added if a calendar change is made. The respondents were very much in favor of more summer classes. More than 70% said they would be more likely to take summer classes if more were offered, while only 20% said they would not. The remaining 10 percent were already taking summer classes. Sixty percent of students said they would be "very likely" or "likely" to take classes during a winter intercession.

Charts 6-7 about here

Next, students were asked to give their preference between a class that meets three times per week for 62 minutes and a class that meets twice per week for 85 minutes.[5] Over 70 percent of students prefer that classes meet two days per week. Also, students were asked their preference between an 18 week semester in which 3-unit classes meet for 3 hours per week (the current situation) and a 16 week semester in which 3-unit classes meet for 3 hours and 23 minutes per week. Sixty-two percent of the students surveyed preferred a 16-week schedule.

Charts 8-9 about here

Finally, students were asked about their preferences regarding semester starting and ending dates. Students were asked to choose between an early fall semester that begins in mid-August and ends in mid-December and a later starting fall semester in which classes begin in early September and end a few days before Christmas. Similarly, students were asked to choose between an early starting spring semester which begins in early January and ends in early May and a later starting spring semester which begins in early February and ends in early June. In both cases, more than 70 percent of students prefer the earlier starting semester. This percentage was slightly higher for spring than for fall.

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[5] The class times asked here assume a change to a 16-week calendar. Currently, most 3-unit classes meet for 50 minutes 3 times per week or for 80 minutes twice per week. These classes meet for 18 weeks each semester. Due to limited facilities, if a calendar change is made, very few classes will be offered three days per week.

Chart 10 about here

Analysis

The survey results provided some evidence that a change to a 16-week semester would benefit students. Though the students face many obstacles to class attendance, it is clear that any class time we choose to schedule would likely find some willing students.[6] In addition, students are very much in favor of additional summer classes and an added winter intercession, both of which could help students complete their coursework faster. The majority of students prefer meeting two days per week and 16 weeks per year, though it should be noted that this majority was not as overwhelming as some might have expected. Student preferences regarding semester start and end dates will help us plan semesters, although it will have to be considered along with several other factors.

Though the committee remained disappointed at the lack of data on course success and retention with a 16-week calendar, the survey results and other information collected through dialogue with colleagues at similar colleges led us to believe that students would likely benefit from a compressed schedule.

The Faculty Survey

Once the committee had concluded that students would likely benefit from a calendar change, a number of questions remained. Most were related to whether the college would have the resources to make the change. These resources include facilities (including classroom space) and staffing for affected areas such as Admissions and Records, Financial Aid, and Maintenance and Operations. One other staffing concern was faculty-related. While it was important to know that students would be willing to take classes at many different times, we were not yet certain whether faculty would be willing to teach these classes. For example, increasing the summer schedule and implementing a winter intercession would be impossible without sufficient faculty available to teach these courses.[7]

In order to determine if the staffing needs could be met for the calendar change, a faculty survey was conducted. The purpose of this survey was not to assess faculty opinion on the calendar change (this information was gathered later in a campus-wide poll conducted by the Academic

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[6] Those wishing to replicate this survey in some form may wish to add questions that ask more specifically about how each obstacle would affect attendance under various conditions. For example, though we know that the majority of our students work (about two thirds) and work presents a scheduling obstacle, we do not know whether that obstacle would be alleviated or exacerbated with a calendar change. Some students may be concerned about the number of hours per week they have available to work part-time during the academic year while others may be more concerned about the number of weeks they have available to work full-time outside the normal academic year. Our survey failed to speak to this level of detail.

[7] This concern was perhaps more of an issue at Porterville College than some other community colleges. Porterville College is a small college with only 87 full-time faculty. Additionally, adjunct faculty can be difficult to recruit, particularly in certain disciplines, because the area where the college is located has a limited pool of available applicants. In Tulare County, where Porterville College resides only 11.9% of the population over age 25 have a Bachelor's degree or higher. (Census Bureau 2002)

Senate), but rather to determine whether there will be sufficient faculty to teach classes under the proposed system.

The proposed calendar change would introduce a variety of adjustments in the days and times when classes are offered. It was important to determine whether faculty would be willing to teach classes under the new conditions. One of these changes will be a substantial increase in the number of courses offered in (mostly 3-hour) block schedules on Fridays during the fall and spring semesters. Another is the introduction of two five-week (and/or one ten-week) summer sessions, with the five-week sessions running consecutively. Additionally, the plan calls for a five-week winter intercession to be run between the fall and spring semester each year.

A one-page, seven-question survey instrument was designed for use in the spring of 2001. This instrument is duplicated in this paper as Appendix B. The survey was placed in the office mailboxes of all full-time faculty. For adjunct (part-time) faculty, the survey was mailed to their homes with a metered return envelope. In all, 82 surveys were returned, 44 from full-time faculty and 38 from adjuncts.

Faculty were asked to respond to five questions about their willingness to teach classes under various conditions. These included Friday block classes, each of the two 5-week summer sessions (early and late), a 10-week summer session, and the winter intercession. A 4-point likert scale was used, with responses ranging from very likely to very unlikely. Respondents were also asked whether they were full-time or adjunct and for the division in which they taught the most classes.

Faculty Survey Results

The most important findings from the faculty survey are shown in Chart 11. Here we see the percentage of faculty who are willing to teach classes at various times. It is clear from these results that there will be faculty members willing to classes in any of the five situations described. This willingness, however, was not uniform. More than half of the faculty are willing to teach classes in an early (June 21-July 23) 5-week summer session or a 5-week winter intercession. Almost half are willing to teach classes in block schedules on Fridays. However less than 30 percent are willing to teach classes in a later (July 26-August 27) 5-week summer session or a 10-week summer session.

Chart 11 about here

Full-time and adjunct faculty did not respond the same way to these questions. A comparison is provided in Chart 12. This chart combines the "very likely" and "likely" responses for each question and shows a comparison between full-time and adjunct faculty. Full-time faculty are more likely than adjuncts to be willing to teach block schedule classes on Fridays. However, adjuncts are more likely to be willing to teach classes at all of the other times measured. With the small sample size, only the 10-week summer session question was statistically significant.

Chart 12 about here

The Decision and Future Research

Having determined that a change to a 16-week semester would benefit students, that sufficient faculty would be available to teach classes at alternative times, and that all other obstacles could be overcome, in late Spring 2002, the Porterville College Compressed Calendar Committee recommended and the Academic Senate accepted that a calendar change would take place beginning with the Fall 2004 term. The implementation was delayed until that time so that all resource issues could be worked out.[8]

One additional concern that was raised during the decision-making process was that the compressed calendar would require instructors to make significant changes in curriculum and how that curriculum is presented. In order to get a sense of how this change would impact instruction, the committee decided to implement a pilot project during the Fall 2002 semester. During this semester, several instructors from various disciplines will teach their courses in a 16-week format while the rest of the campus maintains the existing 18-week schedule.

The main purpose of this project will be to gather feedback from instructors regarding how the calendar change will affect curriculum and course preparation. However, another benefit will be that the pilot project will give us the opportunity to gather information on how the calendar change affects students. At the end of the Fall 2002 semester, we will do a study investigating the impact of the calendar change on student course retention, success and grades. Each of these indices of student success will be measured using the same courses from Fall 2001 as a comparison group.

It should be noted that the generalizability of the pilot study will be limited. The instructors involved in the program are all volunteers. And since the 16-week semester will be overlaid with the normal 18-week semester (beginning at week 3), the students will be self-selecting to some extent as well. However, given the paucity of available information in this area, any data comparing student outcomes using different semester lengths may prove valuable to other colleges considering a change.

[8] As there was a recession during 2002, the college faced a serious budget shortfall for the 2002-03 academic year. The Committee and the Senate felt that it would be preferable to delay implementation of a calendar change until the college could be certain that resources were available, especially in key support areas.

Appendix A

PORTERVILLE COLLEGE Alternative Calendar Survey
Spring 2002

Hello Porterville College students.

This brief survey is being conducted to help in planning for the future of Porterville College. It is confidential and anonymous. Please do not write your name or your answers on these pages. Just fill in the bubble for the most appropriate answer to each question on the Scantron form provided.

Obstacles to Class Attendance

Which, if any, of the following things have you encountered that limit the hours when you can attend class?

		Yes	No
1	Family responsibilities	a	b
2	Work schedule	a	b
3	Child care	a	b
4	Course schedule	a	b
5	Transportation	a	b

Days and times Classes Are Offered

How likely would you be to take a 3-unit class offered at the following times?

	Very Likely	Likely	Unlikely	Very Unlikely
Morning Classes				
6. 6:00 AM to 7:25 AM, twice a week	a	b	c	d
7. 7:00 AM to 8:25 AM, twice a week	a	b	c	d
8. 8:00 AM to 9:25 AM, twice a week	a	b	c	d
Afternoon Classes				
9. 2:00 PM to 3:25 PM, twice a week	a	b	c	d
10. 3:30 PM to 4:55 PM, twice a week	a	b	c	d
11. 2:00 PM to 5:07 PM, once a week	a	b	c	d

Evening Classes

12. 5:00 PM to 6:25 PM, twice a week	a	b	c	d
13. 5:30 PM to 6:55 PM, twice a week	a	b	c	d
14. 6:00 PM to 9:07 PM, once a week	a	b	c	d
15. 7:00 PM to 10:07 PM, once a week	a	b	c	d

Friday or Saturday Classes that Meet Once a Week

16. Friday mornings (9:00 AM to 12:07 PM), once a week	a	b	c	d
17. Friday afternoons (1:00 PM to 4:07 PM), once a week	a	b	c	d
18. Saturday mornings (9:00 AM to 12:07 PM), once a week	a	b	c	d
19. Saturday afternoons (1:00 PM to 4:07 PM), once a week	a	b	c	d

Summer and Winter Classes

20. If more classes were offered in the summer, would you be more likely to attend summer classes?

a Yes b No c I already take summer classes

21. If the college offered classes during winter break (between the fall and spring semesters) how likely would you be to enroll in those classes?

a Very Likely b Likely c Unlikely d Very Unlikely

Class and Semester Preferences

22. Which of the following two options would you prefer for a typical 3-unit class?

a. Option A: A class that meets three times per week for 62 minutes (one hour and 2 minutes) each session.

b. Option B: A class that meets twice per week for 85 minutes (one hour and 25 minutes) each session.

23. Which of the following two options would you prefer for a typical 3-unit class?

a. Option A: An 18-week semester in which a typical 3-unit class meets for 3 hours per week.

b. Option B: A 16-week semester in which a typical 3-unit class meets for 3 hours and 23 minutes per week

24. Which of the following two options would you prefer for the fall semester?

a. Option A: An early starting semester, which begins in mid-August and ends in mid-December.

b. Option B: A later starting semester, which begins in early September and ends a few days before Christmas.

25. Which of the following two options would you prefer for the spring semester?

a. Option A: An early starting semester, which begins in early January and ends in early May.

b. Option B: A later starting semester, which begins in early February and ends in early June.

Demographics.

The following questions will be used for statistical purposes only

26. What is your age?

a Under 21
b 21-24
c 25-29
d 30-49
e 50 or older

27. What is your gender?

a Male b Female

28. What is your ethnicity?

a Black, non-Hispanic
b White, non-Hispanic
c Asian, Pacific Islander
d Hispanic
e American Indian, Alaskan Native

Appendix B

PORTERVILLE COLLEGE FACULTY INTEREST SURVEY
Spring 2002

Hello Porterville College faculty.

This brief survey is being conducted to help in planning for the future of Porterville College. It is confidential and anonymous. Please do not write your name on this page. Just circle the letter that corresponds with your answer for each question and return this page to Mike Carley's faculty box in the mailroom within 5 days.

Class Scheduling

Porterville college is considering a variety of changes to its academic calendar. Please circle how likely you would be to teach classes under the following circumstances. (The dates used in the examples below are hypothetical and are based on the 2003-04 academic year.)

	Very Likely	Likely	Unlikely	Very Unlikely
1. A class in a 5-week summer session beginning about June 21st and ending about July 23rd.	a	b	c	d
2. A class in a 5-week summer session beginning about July 26th and ending about August 27th.	a	b	c	d
3. A class in a 10-week summer session beginning about June 21st and ending about August 27th.	a	b	c	d
4. A class in a 5-week winter session between the fall and spring semesters, which would begin about January 5th and end about February 6th.	a	b	c	d
5. A class in the normal fall and/or spring semester which meets on Fridays for 3 hours and 10 minutes (assuming a 3-unit class).	a	b	c	d

6. Are you full-time or adjunct faculty?

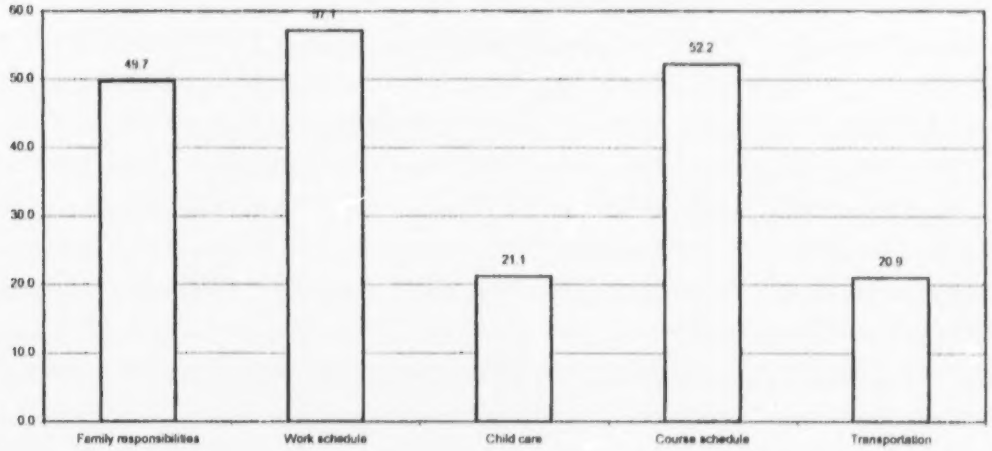
a full-time b adjunct

7. In which academic division do you teach most of your classes?

a Applied Technology
b Business Education
c Education and Career Development
d Fine and Applied Arts
e Health Careers
f Language Arts
g Natural Sciences and Mathematics
h Physical Education and Athletics
i Social Sciences

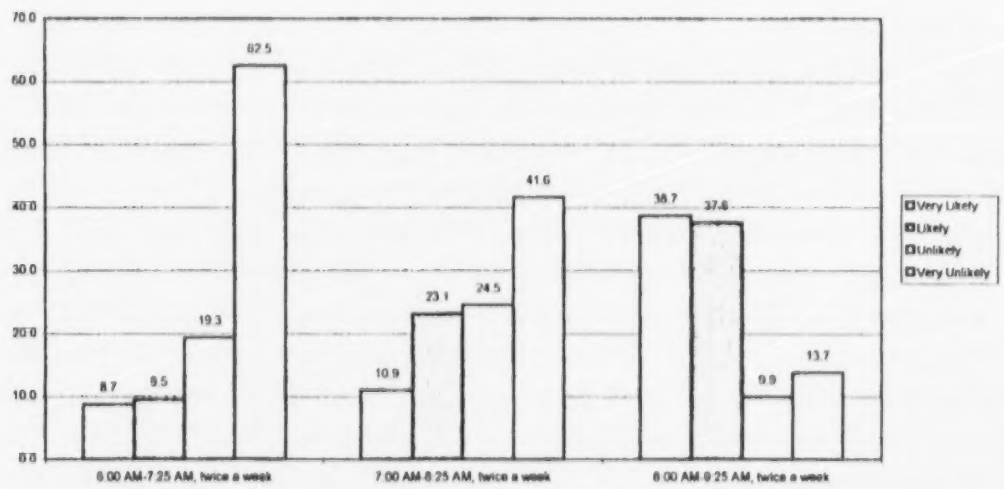
Charts

Chart 1: Percentage of students who have encoungered specific obstacles to class attendance



Notes: N=370 for family responsibilities, 373 for work schedule, 369 for child care, 368 for course schedule, and 369 for transportation.

Chart 2: Student likelihood of taking morning classes



Notes: N=368 for 6:00 and 7:00 classes and 372 for 8:00 classes.

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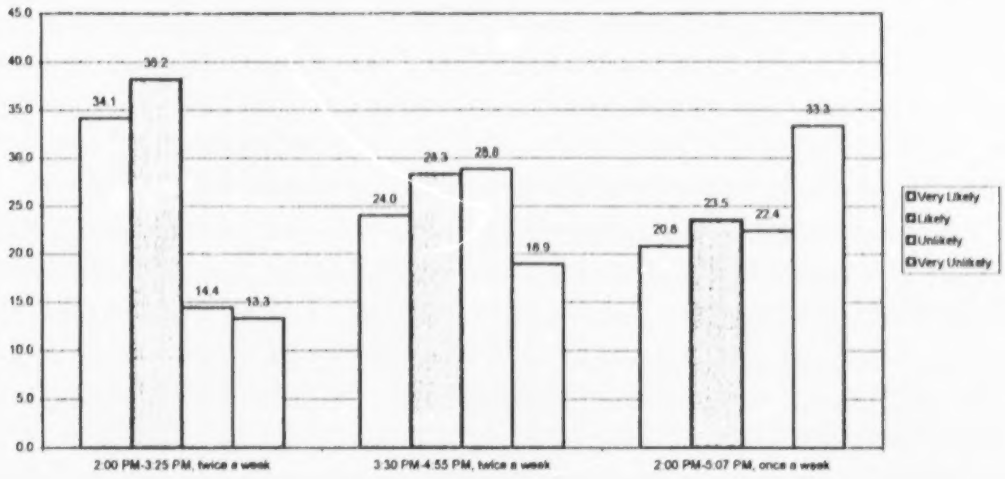
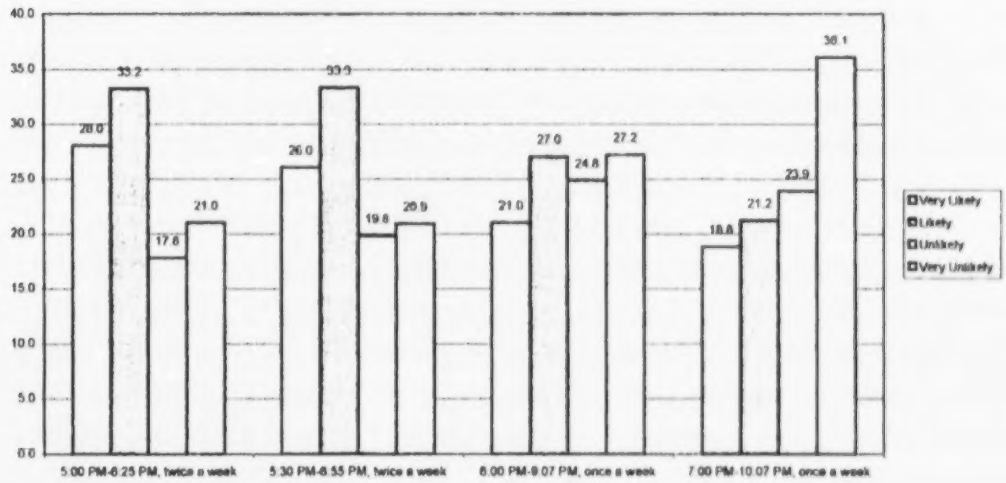
Chart 3: Student likelihood of taking afternoon classes



Notes: N=369 for 2:00, twice a week classes 371 for 3:30 classes, and 366 for 2:00, once a week classes.

Chart 4: Student likelihood of taking evening classes



Notes: N=371 for 5:00 classes, 369 for 5:30 classes, 367 for 6:00 classes, and 368 for 7:00 classes.

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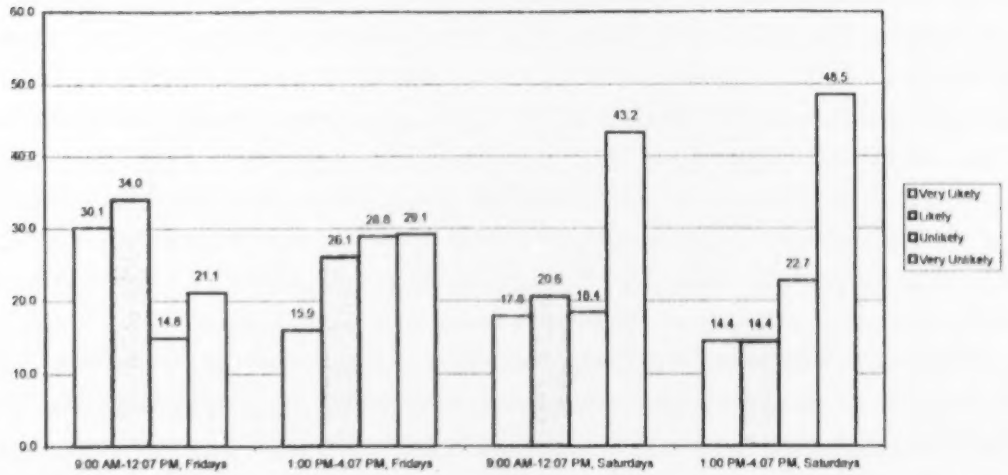
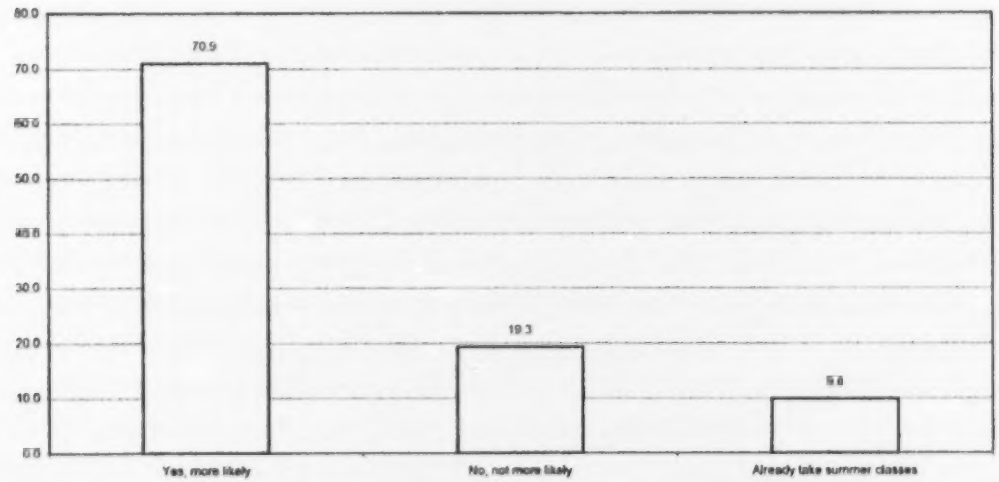
Chart 5: Student likelihood of taking Friday and Saturday classes



Notes: N=365 for Friday, 9:00 AM classes, 364 for Friday 1:00 classes, 359 for Saturday 9:00 AM classes, and 361 for Saturday, 1:00 classes.

Chart 6: Student likelihood of taking more summer classes if more were offered



Notes: N=368.

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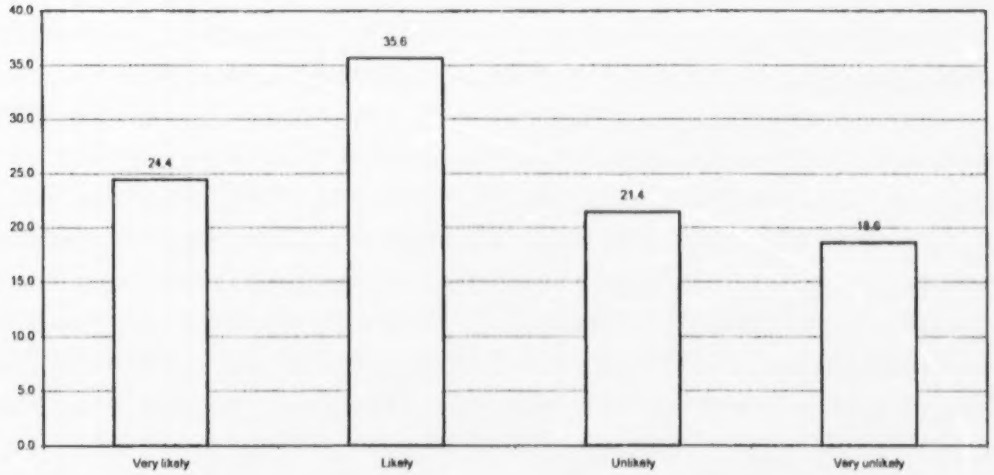
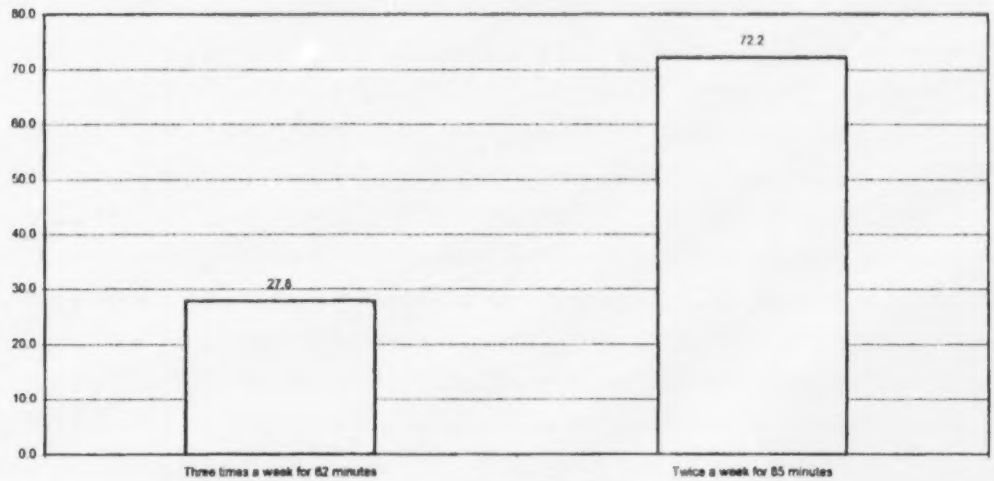
Chart 7: Student likelihood of taking winter intercession classes if offered



Notes: N=365

Chart 8: Student preferences for class length and sessions per week



Notes: N=367.

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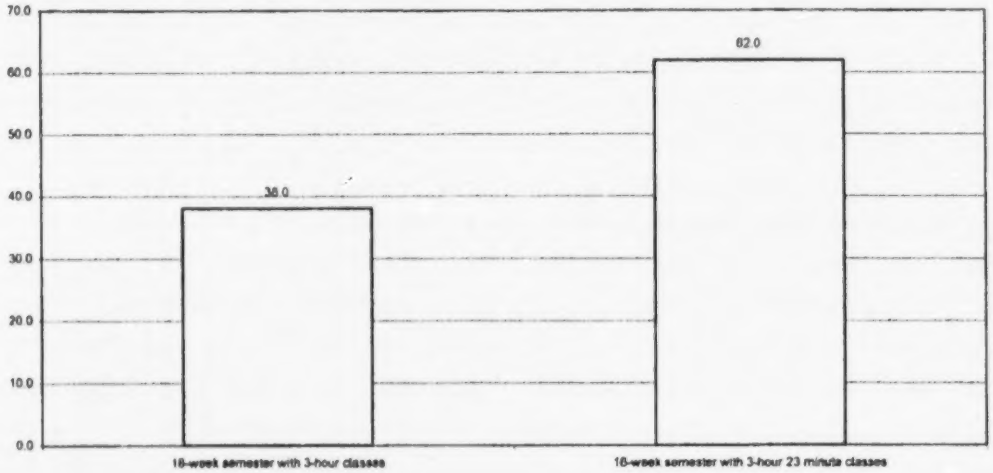
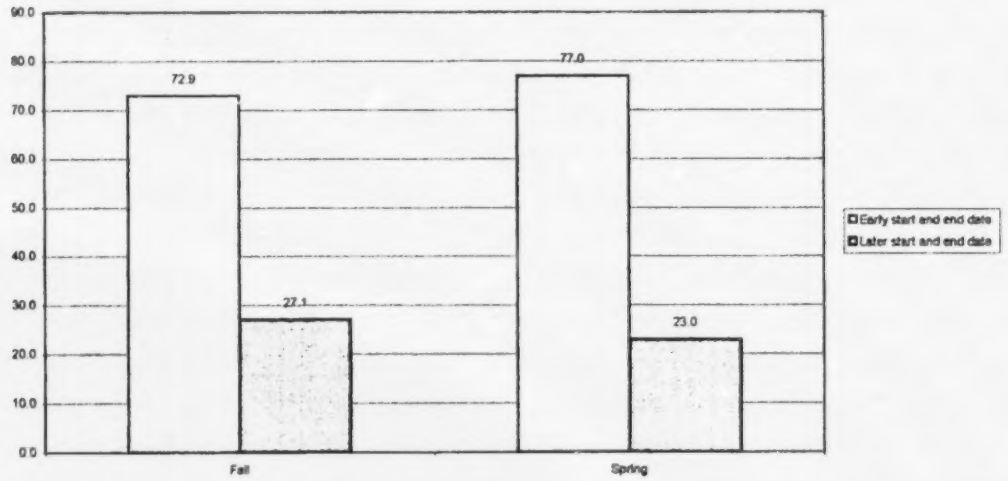
Chart 9: Student preference for semester and class session length



Notes: N=371.

Chart 10: Student preference for semester start and end dates



Note: N=369 for both fall and spring.

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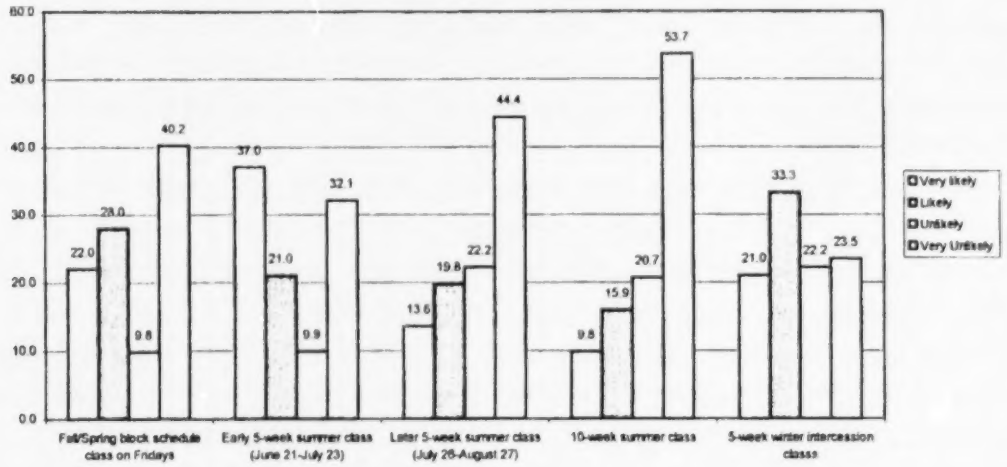
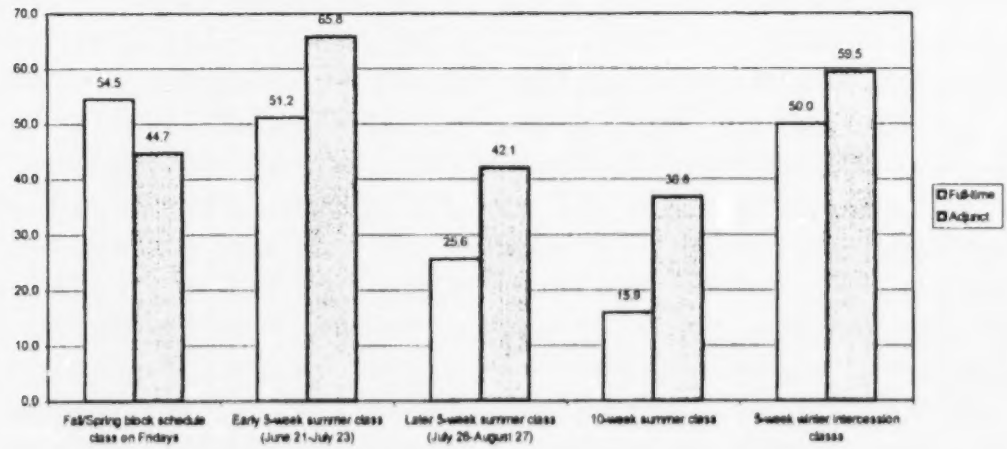
Chart 11: Percentage of Faculty Willing To Teach Classes at Various Times



Note: N=81 for the early summer session, the late summer session and the winter intercession, 82 for the other two questions.

Chart 12: Percentage of full-time and adjunct faculty members willing (likely or very likely) to teach classes at various times



Note: N=81 for the early summer session, the late summer session and the winter intercession, 82 for the other two questions. Only the 10-week summer session question was statistically significant.

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Census Bureau. 2002. Data retrieved from American Factfinder March 5, 2002 (http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/BasicFactsServlet).

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